

SYLVA BRITANNICA.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATES.

PLATE I.—THE SWILCAR-LAWN OAK.

THE OAK, admirable alike for its beauty and utility, has ever been distinguished as the glory of the forest; over all the trees of which it may be considered to reign with undisputed sway, both in importance and longevity.

The Oak was held sacred by the Greeks, the Romans, the Gauls, and the Britons. Among the Romans, it was dedicated to Jupiter; among the ancient Britons, its consecrated shade was devoted to the most solemn ceremonies of the Druids; and scarcely is it held in less veneration by their descendants, who find all the interest of which it may be despoiled by the passing away of the superstitions connected with it in former ages, revived in those present to them, by the ideas of British power, and British independence, inseparably associated with the image of the British Oak, in the minds of Englishmen; who see in every acorn that drops from its branching arms,

Those sapling oaks which at Britannia's call
May heave their trunks mature into the main,
And float the bulwarks of her liberty.—MASON.

In proportion as the Oak is valued above all other trees, so is the English Oak esteemed above that of any other country, for its particular characteristics of hardness and toughness; qualities, which so peculiarly fit it for ship-building, and which are thus admirably expressed in two epithets by that great poet, to whom the book of Nature, and of the human heart, seemed alike laid open.

Thou rather with thy sharp and sulph'rous bolt,
Splitt'st the *unwedged* and *gnarled* Oak,
Than the soft myrtle.—SHAKESPEARE.

The Oak is to be found in all soils; its growth, however, greatly depends on the nature of that wherein it may be planted; for though the hardness of its infancy is such as to render choice or care apparently unnecessary, yet as it advances towards maturity, the depth and extent to which it strikes its roots, make much of both its magnitude and vigor depend on the congenial and uninterrupted field it may find for its powers.

Under favorable circumstances, the Oak attains an age far beyond that which has been assigned to it by popular belief, viz. an hundred years for its growth, an hundred for its maturity, and an hundred for its decline. The Swilcar Oak, represented in the accompanying engraving, is known, by historical documents, to be, at this time, six hundred years old; and it is still far from being in the last stage of decay.

This venerable tree stands in Needwood Forest, in Staffordshire. Its girth, at the height of six feet from the ground, is twenty-one feet four inches and a half. Fifty-four years ago it was girthed in the same place, by a laboring man still living, and measured at that time nineteen feet. It has been celebrated in poetic strains by several modern bards; among whom may be particularized Mr. Mundy, whose mention of it, in his poem of "Needwood Forest," drew forth so elegant a compliment to himself, and so animated an apostrophe to the venerable subject of his verse, from the pen of Doctor Darwin, that it is hoped but little apology will be deemed necessary for introducing the lines containing them, as the most appropriate conclusion that can be given to this article.

"Gigantic Oak! whose wrinkled form hath stood,
Age after age, the patriarch of the wood!—
Thou, who hast seen a thousand springs unfold
Their ravel'd buds, and dip their flowers in gold;
Ten thousand times yon moon re-light her horn,
And that bright star of evening gild the morn!—

"Erst, when the Druid-bards with silver hair
Pour'd round thy trunk the melody of prayer;
When chiefs and heroes join'd the kneeling throng,
And choral virgins trill'd the adorning song;
While harps responsive rung amid the glade,
And holy echoes thrill'd thy vaulted shade;
Say, did such dulcet notes arrest thy gales,
As Mundy pours along the list'ning vales?

"Gigantic Oak! thy hoary head sublime,
Erewhile must perish in the wrecks of time:
Should round thy brow innocuous lightnings shoot,
And no fierce whirlwinds shake the steadfast root;
Yet shalt Thou fall!—thy leafy tresses fade,
And those bare shatter'd antlers strew the glade;
Arm after arm shall leave the mouldering bust,
And thy firm fibres crumble into dust!—

"But Mundy's verse shall consecrate thy name,
And rising forests envy SWILCAR's fame,
Green shall thy germs expand, thy branches play,
And bloom for ever in th' immortal lay."

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